The Outcomes of an In-School SBYD Intervention Focused on Developing Grit and Leadership Characteristics

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A topic that has garnered much attention in the fields of education and psychology has been grit, defined by Duckworth, Peterson, and Kelly (2007), as perseverance and passion for long term goals. While intelligence has been thought to be the major contributor to success, grit has shown to be more predictive than intelligence, physical aptitude, and job tenure in retention within the military, workplace, school and personal relationships (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, Duckworth, 2014). Furthermore, grit has played a significant role in academic success for Black males, with grit having more predictive validity over high school grade point average and standardized test scores (Strayhorn, 2013).

Having grit play such a significant role in predicting academic success and retention has major implications, especially for educators at all levels. Developing grit within students from low resource populations may be an important variable that can reduce the gap in achievement between them and their more privileged counterparts. Nevertheless, it has yet to be elucidated whether grit can be taught and/or what environments are most conducive for fostering grit. While some research has reported positive effects of a school-based character program on retention rates, student achievement and behavioral problems (Perkins-Gough, 2013), no studies have examined the development of grit in individuals.

According to a sport-based youth development (SBYD) framework, sport can be a medium to develop transferable life skills such as grit (Perkins and Noam, 2008). This has been demonstrated by Fuller et al. (2013), who utilized a sport-based youth development framework for an after-school program with Black and Latino boys. Fuller and his colleagues reported positive youth development across the five domains of competence, confidence, connections, character, and caring. In another study conducted by Weiss, Bhalia, Bolter, and Price (2013), the authors examined the impact of a life skills program that utilized golf as the medium. Through interviews, 78% of the interviewees described their ability to transfer life skills from sport to school, jobs, friends and family. These two SBYD programs also provided a safe environment for individuals to learn from their failures, without the excess burden of “cut-throat” competition that they might find in competitive sport programs.

SBYD programs have the potential to foster grit by providing a context for individuals where failing to achieve a goal is viewed as an opportunity to learn. Additionally, SBYD programs are environments where building self-confidence is facilitated, and can lead to participants developing the ability to overcome the resistance to reengage in an activity based on past failures. Through explicit coaching and intentional programming, SBYD programs can be utilized as an avenue that engage youth and foster positive development, specifically grit. Participants may also be able to transfer their new skills to other domains, thus increasing their chances for long-term achievement in school and career. Specifically, Fuller et. al., (2013) reported that when SBYD programs are intentionally designed with the purpose of helping youth reach long-term life goals (Ersing, 2009), they can result in the promotion of social growth and grit (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004).

Utilizing an intentional SBYD framework, we are examining a sport intervention for middle school boys enrolled in a turnaround school in a major urban school district in the Northeast. The school enrolls 100% Black and Latino students. The program meets twice a week for 26 weeks with 30 participants. Utilizing a pre-post test design, we hypothesize that grit will be fostered within the SBYD intervention participants. This will be measured with the Grit(S) survey (Duckworth and Quinn, 2009). Additionally, we will be conducting focus group interviews with teachers and administrators at the end point of the intervention to assess changes in grit levels through participant behavior in other domains.
The benefits of designing SBYD programs intentionally to promote the characteristics of grit can apply to both the life and academic outcomes of youth. These non-cognitive types of skills (i.e. critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, emotional health, social skills, work ethic, and community responsibility; Rothstein et. al., (2008) have the potential to directly impact outcomes within the classroom as well as with post-academic lives as youth transition into adulthood and the workforce. If SBYD principles can be successfully implemented in interventions that target non-cognitive grit skills and strengthen academic outcomes in youth, then the long-term benefits would likely persist in to adulthood (West et al, 2014).

References


Fuller, Percy, and Bruening (2013) Positive Youth Development: Minority Male Participation in a Sport-Based Afterschool Program in an Urban Environment, Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport 84:4, 469-482.


